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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000621

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SUBJECT: KARZAI AMENABLE TO ECC CHANGE, FOCUSED ON CAPACITY
BUILDING

Classified By: Ambassador Eikenberry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: President Karzai expressed confidence in the ongoing Marja operation in a meeting with General McChrystal and me on February 16. Speaking privately with me afterward, Karzai was receptive to the suggestion that the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) include two international members, in contrast to the decree recently passed by Karzai's cabinet that would strip the commission of all international members. I told Karzai that I would be holding VTCs with principals on February 16 and then with the NSC the next day and that elections and reconciliation and reintegration were likely to be the top issues raised in those discussions. While battling an ongoing throat ailment, Karzai appeared confident and alert during the meeting. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Karzai was receptive to General McChrystal's briefing on the Marja operation, and was particularly appreciative of COMISAF's explanation of the circumstances that led to civilian casualties during the operation, and of the steps ISAF forces are taking to learn from this incident and to avoid civilian casualties in the future. General McChrystal assured Karzai that preventing civilian casualties is one of his highest concerns. The President, expressing confidence in the military operation, said he understood the explanation of the event, and that he hoped to travel to Marja as soon as the security situation would permit.

ECC - Progress Still Possible

¶3. (C) After reviewing the way ahead and sequencing of bilateral events for the coming year, I raised the issue of modifying the ECC. I told Karzai I endorsed the plan that UN SRSG Kai Eide put forward to have two international representatives as commissioners on the ECC, with the caveat that at least one vote from a foreign commissioner would be required for a ruling to pass. This plan, I explained, would please Afghans because it speaks to their desire for sovereignty, but also obviates the risk that, if something goes wrong, all the blame will fall on the Karzai Administration. This interim step, I said, can start the process of nationalizing the ECC, while retaining international support as Afghanistan works on developing the capacity of its electoral systems. Karzai acknowledged that Eide had raised this idea with him, and said he agreed with the plan and would proceed on implementing it. Speaking of the long term, Karzai emphasized his interest in strengthening Afghanistan's electoral institutions, and cited India, with its impartial and respected elections system, as a model he thinks Afghanistan should emulate. (Comment: We immediately called Eide after this conversation, and urged him to bring this issue to a close when Eide meets with Karzai in the next few days. Eide told us on 17 February he

would see Karzai the next day and had been informed by the President's Chief of Staff Daudzai that Karzai has agreed to the proposal.)

¶4. (C) When asked whether Independent Elections Commission (IEC) chief Azizullah Ludin would remain in his position, which, by law, he should have vacated in January, Karzai acknowledged the concerns surrounding Ludin, but cited his stubbornness as a reason to retain him. If Karzai intended to have a fresh start with the upcoming elections, I countered, it would be beneficial to have a fresh face at the IEC. KarzaQreplied that he had not yet seriously considered potential replacements for Ludin but seemed to recognize the need for change.

Capacity Building - Priority for Second Term

¶5. (C) After reflecting on some of the weaknesses of Qe IEC and ECC, Karzai expressed his wish to focus on improving capacity throughout his government's civil service. I cited the extensive work the U.S. is doing in training sixteen thousand civil servants through USAID programs, but also acknowledged the need for longer-term training. I said that I had recently met with the head of the Civil Society Institute (CSI), who seemed to have a direction and vision for the institute, and I encouraged Karzai to do the same. Karzai agreed to go soon and assess the CSI director. I noted the large gains Afghanistan has already made in capacity building since 2002, especially in the form of increased human capacity brought about by a new generation of

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educated Afghans who are graduating and entering the work force. This cadre of people will allow for sustained institution building, I said.

¶6. (C) I informed Karzai that I had recently met with the Kabul mayor, as part of a US initiative to work closely with the Kabul City Municipality to help develop and beautify the capital. In the short term, I said, we are focused on helping the city prepare to host the conference this spring, so the international community will see that Kabul is a city that is coming back to life. The development of Kabul, I said, is a key legacy for the people of Afghanistan.

Structure Needed for Reconciliation & Reintegration

¶7. (S) Karzai asked me about the New York Times report regarding the capture of Mullah Barader, which I acknowledged was true. Responding to my comment that it is yet another example of U.S. government employees leaking sensitive information to the media, Karzai quipped that "this is a good leak." I offered to arrange a briefing for Karzai by our Chief of Station, which he readily accepted. I asked Karzai if Barader was from his tribe, and what he thought of his capture. He replied that Barader was from the same tribe, and that he had long been viewed as someone who is a soft target for reconciliation. He only became more radicalized, Karzai claimed, after there was a security raid on his house, which prompted him to move to Pakistan. Karzai said he would like to have Barader in Afghan custody, because he felt that Barader could prove useful in advancing reconciliation. If they treat him with respect, Karzai said, Barader could encourage many Taliban leaders to follow his example of returning to Afghan society. He added that transferring Barader to Afghan custody would be a sign that Pakistan is in clear support of reaching a peaceful settlement of the Taliban problem with Afghanistan, Karzai said.

¶8. (C) I contrasted for Karzai the difference between reconciliation and reintegration, saying that reconciliation is a process, whereas reintegration involves practical work

that requires a machinery to support it. Karzai raised the possibility that Sibghatullah Mojaddidy would leave the Senate to become the "spiritual" leader of the reintegration effort and confirmed that Stanekzai would serve as the pragmatic leader for reintegration. As there are increasingly positive signs that reintegration can work, I said, it is becoming more urgent that GIROA develop the mechanism that will support the reintegration effort. I suggested it would be helpful to have this mechanism set up before Karzai's proposed trip to Washington this spring, and the President agreed.

¶9. (C) Seeking to preclude any misunderstandings, I informed Karzai that I had met with Abdullah Abdullah February 15 and was surprised by his positive assessment of the security situation, which he described as improving. Abdullah also offered his support for the Marja operation, which he saw as a building block for Afghans' sense of confidence that their country is heading in the right direction. Karzai asked me if Abdullah was still in town and was amused to learn that he is in France, where he is being honored by the French Socialist Party.

¶10. (C) Karzai continues to battle a throat ailment that has been bothering him since his trip to Munich earlier this month. I asked him if he would like to receive treatment from a U.S. military doctor, especially if there was one in theater who specializes in treating throats. Karzai said that he would appreciate that. (Comment: I have known Karzai for many years and know he is not one to complain about his health. His readiness to seek further medical treatment shows that he is either in great pain, or troubled by his illness, or both. USFOR-A did send an ENT specialist, who diagnosed Karzai as simply suffering from a very persistent common cold.)
Eikenberry